

Techniques

For an Air Assault Withdrawal

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Air assaults are often conducted along with other types of operations, including attacks or raids. Those operations sometimes also require helicopters to exfiltrate the unit once the mission is complete. Units planning an

air assault conduct course of action development and analysis on how to enter the objective. Unfortunately, they do not spend the same amount of planning time in developing a course of action for the withdrawal. As a result, the

withdrawal is not synchronized and is poorly executed, and if a withdrawal is under pressure from the enemy, soldiers could be exposed to fire or attack for long periods of time.

Traditionally, an air assault with-

drawal is used for missions similar to a raid, where the unit is not required to hold the objective, a withdrawal is required, and speed out of the objective area is a priority. Ensuring that the withdrawal is conducted efficiently requires an additional element in the normal task organization. This element must be able to secure the withdrawal pickup zone (PZ), mark the zone and chalk locations and possibly guide units into their chalk locations, and command and control PZ operations. The size of the element may vary from a squad to a company minus, depending on the level of the air assault. For simplicity, the element may be designated Team PZ with subunits organized into a security force and marking or guide teams.

The responsibilities of the Team PZ begin as soon as the unit is inserted and moves toward the objective. If the landing zone (LZ) is also to be used as the withdrawal PZ (which is not the ideal course of action), then the Team PZ remains at that location; if not, the team moves to another PZ location.

The following is a recommended list of Team PZ activities at the withdrawal PZ:

Preparation of the PZ

- The security team leader positions the security team to ensure that the PZ is secured.

- Depending on the size of the PZ and factors of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time available), the PZ and surrounding woodline are cleared of enemy and obstacles.

- At a minimum, security teams are positioned on each corner of the PZ. Enemy avenues of approach are also blocked.

- A contingency plan is issued to the security teams (if not already covered in the operations order).

- The team PZ leader establishes the command post, which will become the "choke point" where the withdrawing elements link up and are funneled through to their chalks.

- The choke point will be to the rear of where the chalks will be marked.

- The chalk marking team leader designates the location of each chalk.

- During daylight, VS 17 panels may be used. During limited visibility, chemical lights can be used when necessary (ideally, these are not visible until the unit starts moving toward the PZ).

- If guides are used, they reconnoiter the route from the choke point to the chalk location.

- The team PZ leader maintains communication with the main body conducting the attack and, if possible, with the security force and the chalk marking team leader.

- Based on the number of radios in a unit, it may not be possible to maintain communication with all elements in the PZ security force, but PRC-126s may be cross-leveled within a unit to facilitate communication within the security force.

- If FM radio communication cannot be maintained with the PZ security team, there must be a prearranged signal to notify the team to withdraw to the PZ and their chalk locations.

- The leader also monitors the radio as the aircraft approach. The aircraft should communicate on the leader's frequency, which will probably be the command push. Again, depending on the number of radios available, another frequency can be used to communicate with the aircraft. This is the best technique because the commander will want to avoid clutter on his net and allow for control of the main body.

Execution of the Withdrawal

- When the team PZ leader is notified that the unit is withdrawing, guides move to the choke point and prepare to receive the unit.

- The chalk team marks the PZ.

- Depending on METT-T, a team may mark the PZ. Several infrared chemical lights can be positioned to guide the lead aircraft during periods of limited visibility. This technique is desirable for night operations when visibility is low. During periods of high illumination, it is more difficult for pilots to see the chemical lights.

- As the main body enters the choke point, guides take the units to their chalk locations.

- If a sufficient number of personnel are not available to perform the duties of guides, the chalk team leader may act as the "traffic cop" and verbally direct the units to their chalk locations.

- The units from the main body should enter the choke point in chalk order. Chalks should be configured at the objective rally point (ORP) after the completion of the mission.

- The wounded and dead should be placed in separate chalks on aircraft that are dedicated to transport them to a medical facility (medical company, brigade support area, combat trains). This should be discussed during the air mission brief.

- The team PZ leader establishes communication with the approaching aircraft and provides terminal guidance.

- When the aircraft land, chalks load the helicopters.

- If there is more than one lift, chalks on subsequent lifts provide local security.

- The PZ security team is the last element to load aircraft. The teams move directly to their designated aircraft, or they may be required to go through the choke point.

- The team PZ leader notifies the commander that the PZ is clean.

Actions for the withdrawal must be briefed during the air mission brief in the same detail as the insertion. The team PZ leader must issue his own operations order and conduct detailed rehearsals. Contingency plans must be briefed and rehearsed, including actions on contact and movement to alternate landing or pickup zones. The air assault withdrawal is potentially confusing, and failure to plan for it in detail could be disastrous. With thorough and practiced SOPs, however, along with wargaming, the withdrawal from an area of operations can be as smooth as the insertion.

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